

*Gazette* Project

Interview with

Steve Keesee  
Little Rock, Arkansas,  
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Interviewer: Michael Haddigan

Michael Haddigan: I am with Steve Keesee, a photographer at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and former photographer at the *Arkansas Gazette*. Steve, I first have to say that this interview is part of the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History Project on the *Arkansas Gazette*. We will transcribe this interview and make it available to those interested in Arkansas history. We will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which point you will sign a release. All I need to do now is for you to tell me your name and for you to indicate that you are willing to give the Center permission to use this tape and make the transcription available to others.

Steve Keesee: My name is Steve Keesee, and I am happy to allow you to do this. I am looking forward to the interview.

MH: Okay. First of all, Steve, you are a native of Crawfordsville, Indiana?

SK: I was born in Oakland, California, on September 14, 1945. My father was in the Navy stationed at the Alameda Air Station. I was born at a military hospital near the air station. My father was a native Hoosier like my mom. We moved back to

Indiana at the end of the war. I grew up in Indiana.

MH: And the name of the town?

SK: Crawfordsville, Indiana. It is forty-five miles northwest of Indianapolis and has a population of about 15,000.

MH: I know you are a big Indy 500 fan. As a kid did you go to see the race every year?

SK: Yes. The first time I went to the 500 track was for qualifying days. It was less hectic and less people. There would be 200,000 people instead of 500,000 people there. I became a really big fan. A lot of people grow up in baseball towns where they have baseball players as their heroes. I grew up near Indianapolis and race car drivers were my heroes. The only bad thing, I would lose a hero every year or so to a death. It was something that I think most Hoosier boys get into if they are not very good basketball players.

MH: Can you remember some of the drivers that you were big on?

SK: Bill Vukovica was the first driver that I really followed closely. He was killed at Indianapolis while I was listening to a race. Instead of showing it on television they used to have it live on radio. He was one. There were several others. Sam Hanks, who actually got to retire. There were a number of others. I remember seeing A. J. Foyt his rookie year. Jimmy Clark, Grant Hill, I followed them to about 1965. I still try to keep up with it a little bit. In 1965 I joined the Air Force. I graduated from Crawfordsville High School in 1963. I moved to Indianapolis to live on my own at the YMCA. I was working at Cooper's Studio. I thought I

would be doing photography, but I did a lot of darkroom work. I lived there for two years making \$45.00 a week. I paid \$10.00 of it to the Y to live there. It was a good experience because it was the first time I got outside the bubble of protection of my family. I learned a lot. The draft was breathing down my neck. I always wanted to be a newspaper photographer, ever since I was 12 or 13. That was the reason that I wanted to go to Indianapolis, to work for a photography studio.

MH: Let me back up just a little bit and ask you about that. What was it as a kid that made you interested in newspaper photography? How old were you when you first became one?

SK: I was probably ten. This is one of those “sappy” stories, but it is true. The last year of my eligibility for the Easter Egg Hunt, I found the golden egg, which is the prize egg. I won a camera --- a Brownie Hawkeye. I had always liked taking pictures, and would use my mother’s camera. I wouldn’t take anything other than family portraits. With the Brownie Hawkeye camera I started experimenting more. I got interested in photojournalism through one publication, *Life* magazine. I could look at a photograph in that magazine for hours. People’s expressions and things like that. I just kind of went on and decided to study it. I was a self-taught photographer.

MH: So this would have been in the mid 1950s when *Life* magazine and *Look* magazine were very popular.

SK: Yes, from 1955 until I graduated from high school in 1963. I paid very close

attention to the photographers' work.

MH: When you were in high school, did you work on the student paper or yearbook or any of those sorts of things?

SK: Yes, I was on the newspaper staff as a photographer. My problem was that I played sports. I played football and wrestled. It took away from my working with an organized group. I kept taking pictures on my own. On weekends I would just take off walking with my camera. When I shot up a roll of film, I would come back to the house. I had my own little darkroom kit. When the sun went down, I would take the one bathroom in the house and turn it into a darkroom. My parents and my siblings would start pounding on the doors. As long as you kept the doors locked. . . [Laughter]

MH: How many brothers or sisters did you have?

SK: I have three brothers and one sister. My sister lives in Atlanta. All three brothers still live in Indiana.

MH: Any of them photographers or journalists in any way?

SK: No, my father was a city fireman. He was also a contractor, builder. In fact, he built the last three or four houses that we lived in. My brother, Jeff, has taken up that part. My brother, David, is a minister. My brother, Tom, is an artist, a painter. He works for a museum in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

MH: In high school you did some photography on your own to maintain your interest?

SK: Yes.

MH: When you graduated High School, you moved to Indianapolis. You got a job in a

photo studio. You said you hoped you would do more photography than lab work, but you ended up doing a lot of lab work. Is that right?

SK: Yes, I didn't know photography. I just did all lab work. I think it was good experience to get away from my parents. I grew up in a sheltered life. I mean, when you grow up in Crawfordsville, Indiana, in the 1950s, you were sheltered from reality. It was good for me to get out and get some experience behind me, to see life as it really is instead of how it should be.

MH: What did you do with the photos?

SK: I did some processing of film, but mostly I ran the machine that produced colored prints. Someone would print the photos, and I would run them through the processor. During Christmas time it was an all day process. We would go in there at 7:00 in the morning and not come out until 3:00 in the afternoon. It was a constant flow of photographs.

MH: These were family portraits, kid pictures. . .

SK: Stuff that people would pick up their box cameras and shoot pictures.

MH: Did you go into the Air Force directly from that job?

SK: I guess it was the early part of 1965. I decided --- I knew I was going to be drafted some time that year. I just did not know when. I decided to go back home for a couple of months. I got a job with Shepherds and Sons, a factory that built equipment carts. There was a lot of welding. That was kind of fun, but I would burn my eyes so badly because you would have to look to see where you would start to weld. A lot of times the welding rod would start the side of the metal and

cause blisters in my eyes. I really hated that part of the job.

MH: That was not going to be the future for you . . .

SK: I was ready for the Air Force when the Selective Service called me up for a physical, I am guessing, around July. I said, "Well, they are getting close." So I signed up. I joined the Air Force mainly because of the insistence of my dad, who was in the Navy during World War II and my Uncle Ernie who was in Korea. They told me, "Son, you do not need to join the Marine Corps," which I was thinking about doing. He said, "The Air Force is a good place. At the end of your day, you have some clean sheets to sleep on." They were a heavy influence. At the time, I was 19 years old.

MH: What career field did you go into?

SK: Of course, I had put in for photography. The Air Force made sure I was happy and gave me Supply --- I drove a ton and a half truck for four years delivering supplies.

MH: Where were you stationed?

SK: I went to Lackland Air Force Base for my basic training. After that, they sent almost the entire group to Supply at the Little Rock Air Force Base. That was my first time to see Little Rock. That's basically how I came to the state. It was October of 1965 after basic training.

MH: Did you stay at that base the whole time?

SK: Yes, it was a SAC [Strategic Air Command] base at the time. All they did was prepare for World War III. I figured we weren't going to get any combat. If we

did, it wasn't going to last long. I thought it would be a short war and would go on home if I could. [Laughter]

MH: I assumed you kept doing your photography during this time.

SK: Yes, I owned a 35mm [35 millimeter]. I had worked for my dad who was in contracting. I would haul roofing to him. Different jobs, digging ditches, knocking out walls. I got the dirty jobs. Dad paid me a little money. I took that money and bought a 35 mm. I was still in high school.

MH: How did it end up that you started working at the *Arkansas Gazette*? What happened when you got out of the Air Force?

SK: Before I got out of the Air Force --- like I said, I spent the entire enlistment at the Little Rock Air Force Base. I started working part-time for the *Jacksonville Daily News*. Bob Sallee, who was a columnist for the *Democrat-Gazette*, was editor of the Jacksonville paper at the time. I would shoot sporting events and check passings and things like that. I was basically getting a little bit of experience. The only experience I had was of taking pictures of just what I wanted to take pictures of. I never was told to go and get a picture until then. I started learning by looking at *Life* magazine and newspapers and stuff how pictures should be shot.

MH: Did you just walk into the office and say, "Who do I talk to and . . .?"

SK: It wasn't even that complicated. They ran a want ad in the Jacksonville paper saying they wanted a photographer. "We will pay minimum salary." So I went there and said --- I had just won a big contest for the *Arkansas Democrat*. Every

summer they would have an amateur photo contest and one of the pictures that I had sent in won a weekly contest. They would take all the winners and send them to New York. I won one of the national prizes with one of my pictures. I sort of had a portfolio of one. I told them I won a national contest with the picture. Of course, I got hired. No one else had come in to apply for the job. I actually had my own camera and had my foot in the door.

MH: That was when? What year?

SK: 1968, September, when I first started taking pictures for the newspaper.

MH: What kind of money were you making? Do you remember?

SK: Actually, I was making pretty good money. I was making \$95.00 a week. That's after I left the service. Before that it was probably \$30.00 a week. When I first got out, they put me on full time and I started making \$95.00 a week. I earned every dime of that money. I worked from 10:00 a.m. to about 2:00 a.m. every day, six days a week.

MH: Going to all the meetings . . .

SK: No, I had to paste the want ads, the comic sections. I would shoot the pages and all the half tones and strip them in on the pages, plus try to squeeze in as many pictures as I could.

MH: Did you feel like you had made it at that point? That you were in the game?

SK: No, I knew at that point that something had better change! [Laughter] I would probably go back to Crawfordsville and become a carpenter or something. I had some really good luck in that point in time. Bob Sallee was tired of being editor



of a small-town newspaper. He was working some extremely long hours as well. He got tired of it and was wanting to get back to the *Democrat*, where he actually started. Gene Foreman was the managing editor. He went in to talk to him and said he needed a reporter's job. He told him he didn't have anything right now. "We have a photographer's opening. Do you know a photographer?" So Bob said, "Well, there is a kid that works with me." So he said, "Why don't you have him come by, and we will interview him." That was March or April of 1969. I had just gotten out of the service about two months before. I couldn't believe that I had such good luck. I went in there and it was basically the same old thing. They said, "Well, Steve, we can't pay you much more than \$95.00 a week." "That's okay with me, just don't make me work 40 hours a day." [Laughter]

MH: You joined them in 1969?

SK: Yes, it was April of 1969. Believe it or not, I got hired at the *Democrat* with just a handful of newspaper clippings. That was it. You could not even get your foot in the door now with that. I guess back then not many people were wanting to become photojournalists. It was probably the biggest break in my life.

MH: Who did you work with? Who was the photo editor?

SK: At the time it was Owen Gunter, who was the chief photographer at the *Democrat*. The other, third, photographer was Glen Moon. Both of those guys, to me --- you are talking to a twenty-five-year-old guy --- they seemed older than the hills. They were probably my age now. Both of them were from World War II and at the end of their careers. They just didn't give a damn about their job.

[Laughter] So here I was, I was just the young kid on the block. I was eager to do a good job. I got all the choice assignments.

MH: Just because you were willing to go out and do it. Do you remember what kind of things that you shot for the *Democrat* back then?

SK: A lot of the integration stuff was going on at the time. One of the things that I remember was Sweet Willie Wine of Memphis, Tennessee. He made a march from Memphis to Little Rock down the Old Memphis Highway. We covered it every day. I would drive to where they were and take pictures for a while and drive back to the office, which was very interesting in itself.

MH: If I remember this correctly, Sweet Willie Wine was a Civil Rights activist from Memphis who led his march from Memphis to Little Rock to highlight Civil Rights issues.

SK: I don't remember what the issues are right now.

MH: I think there was some kind of precipitating event that . . .

SK: I think you are right. I can't remember what it was, but, anyway, I covered several things like that. Probably, my most noteworthy assignment was with Bill Husted and another reporter. The three of us were sent to Marianna, Arkansas. Marianna was --- African-Americans there felt the local businesses weren't hiring enough minorities. They decided to do a boycott and do all their shopping in Forrest City. This was the most powerful tool anybody could use. I think the majority of the people who were buying stuff in Marianna were black. They were all loading up in buses and cars and driving to Forrest City to do their shopping.

We went there the day after Bill Husted was sort of mugged. He was kicked around by a mob of good white citizens in that community. Of course, they decided, "Let's go back and cover him, so we can get pictures this time." We went into town, and there are pick-up trucks with gun racks, and people running around. We think this might be kind of dicey. [Laughter] We wound up staying in a motel that night, and the next morning we started working. For some reason, Husted and the other reporter wanted to go to the newspaper office, which was in the town square, to do some research or something. They are in there trying to get permission to go through some files. I started looking outside and it reminded me of Hitchcock's, "The Birds," the one scene where the one woman turns around and maybe two or three big black birds are behind her. I turned around, and there were about twenty people outside. After awhile, it would be about forty people. After awhile, it would be fifty people. I finally got the attention of the reporters. I said, "Look, there are a bunch of people gathering up outside." So Bill Husted called the police department, which was a block away. It was on the same town square. He said, "Hey, we are a couple of reporters and we think our lives are in danger here." They hung up on him. [Laughter]

MH: To protect and to serve.

SK: This did not really give us a lot of confidence of surviving this thing. I was getting pretty nervous about it. Pretty soon, they came in through the front door. They grabbed Husted, the other guy, and me. They took away my cameras, my own personal cameras.

MH: These were irate white citizens that resented you being there?

SK: They thought the reason their community was in such an uproar was because of the press. They felt that if we didn't give the black community publicity then it would all blow away. Or they could handle the situation on their own, or whatever.

MH: They get your camera. This must have driven you crazy.

SK: Yes, you are talking about someone who is basically making minimum wage and losing something valuable. I ended up talking to them and saying, "Look, I will give you my film, but give me my camera back." They did. They might have taken a jacket from me, a wind breaker. I didn't think anything about it, but I received a phone call a couple of months later. The sheriff or police department said, "Well, we have your jacket." I said, "That's all right, just hang on to it." [Laughter] So, anyway, they drug us outside basically. I say drug — they led us outside. They were all yelling. It was what you would see in the movies. They were wanting to string us up. Thank God there were some cool heads in that group. They said, "Just tell them not to come back." I said, "Okay."

MH: Did you leave town at that point?

SK: Yes, they followed us all the way to the city limits. We headed back to Little Rock. It was an experience. I didn't have a prize winning picture from the experience.

MH: Just all in a day's work. How long did you stay at the *Democrat*?

SK: I stayed there for a little over two years. I started there in April 1969, and I left

tin January of '72. Pat Patterson, who was a photographer for the *Arkansas Gazette*, and I were good friends. I think all photographers of both of the papers knew each other pretty well. We would wind up being with each other on assignments. Pat had asked me when Morris White, who was the fourth photographer, fourth man in seniority, left to move to Springdale, Pat asked me if I would be interested in the job. I said, "Well, yes, I would be." For one thing, the editor of the *Democrat* had just taken a job at *Newsday*, and half of the staff went with him. It wasn't as much fun as it had been. My interview was conducted at New Brunswick Pool Hall. I met the managing editor then, Nelson, A.R. Nelson. He was shooting pool while he was interviewing me for the job. After the pool game, he hired me. When can I start?

MH: Where was that pool hall?

SK: It is still in existence today. I think it was either at the Capitol Hotel or a building near the Capitol Hotel. It faced out like we would have been at the Excelsior Hotel, which I think then was the Marion Hotel.

MH: Was that kind of a hang out?

SK: Apparently it was. It was a hang out for the newspaper types. I never hung out there.

MH: You went to work for the *Gazette* in January of 1972. Pat Patterson, was he the photo editor?

SK: No, Pat was just a photographer. Larry Obsitnik was the photo editor. Gene Prescott was the next in line. Then it was Pat, and like I said, Morris White had

left. I replaced Morris White.

MH: At that point, what was the state of photographic technology at that point? You used 35mm cameras, you shot, then you came back. What was the darkroom like there?

SK: The darkroom at the *Gazette* was what I considered the top of the line compared to what the *Democrat* was. The *Democrat* was more like a dungeon. The *Gazette* had separate print rooms. They had one room for just processing the film. It was all black and white. I don't think I ever shot a roll of color my first ten or fifteen years at the *Gazette*. I basically shot everything on 35mm and processed the film and printed 8" x 10" for the paper.

MH: What was it like working for guys like Larry Obsitnik and Gene Prescott, who were a generation ahead of you, really? What was it like working for them?

SK: Like any other job, you are going to have growing pains. I love both of those guys. Larry Obsitnik had a drinking problem at the time. He would go away for hours on end and drink. That caused some problems because we ended up doing all the work while he was gone. As time went on, I became more understanding. Here was a guy that had put his time into the paper. He just never really felt like he had accomplished all that he wanted. He was an excellent photographer. Gene was an excellent photographer as well as Pat. I learned from all three of them.

MH: The chief was kind of assertive and kind of brusque and difficult to get along with at times. Were there times when you thought you could not work for him anymore?

SK: That was part of the growing pains. That was what I had problems with. As you noticed, Pat Patterson was the one who got me to come over here. It was obvious that they were hiring photographers around Larry Obsitnik. I can understand his resentment. Larry and I actually became pretty good friends. I kind of understood Larry, and he understood me. We would actually go out drinking together on occasions.

MH: Gene Prescott is another guy who is an interesting character. He was in World War II and Pearl Harbor. He was in the Marine Corps all the way through the war. He was really an old timey kind of photographer in a lot of way. How was it working with him?

SK: Gene had a lot of problems with Larry. Larry was jealous of him, I believe. Gene had everything that Larry didn't have. He had a great home, a great family, children to love him. Larry didn't and he had a tough time of it. Gene is a lot of fun and the most entertaining photographer that I have ever been around. He is as sly as a fox. You have to understand that Gene loves to put people on. When I was shooting against him at the *Democrat*, I figured Gene out real fast. You better be careful with Gene because he will kick your butt. He will embarrass you the next morning when the *Gazette* comes out. Editors always like to ask why you didn't get that picture. Gene was great at that.

MH: Sort of make out that he wasn't getting anything that day or forgot to put film in the camera.

SK: His favorite thing was to come over --- this is what he did to every news

photographer --- Gene was shooting a two and a quarter Rollei, which was around one of those twin-lens cameras. He shot a larger format film. Gene would come over and say, "Is that one of those new 35mm's? Do you mind if I look at it? How does this thing work? Is there a button that you have to push?" He would look at the thing like he had never seen one in his life. If you were naïve, like I was or most of the other photographers coming in for the first time, you would start answering his questions real straight. That was his favorite thing to do. I always enjoyed sitting back and watching him do it to the new photographers.

MH: Pat Patterson was sort of a polar opposite of Larry Obsitnik?

SK: I doubt if there were ten photographers at the time that knew the technical stuff on photography. Pat was like a scientist. He understood photography. I understand how to take pictures. I understand how to capture a moment. Pat understood the technical parts of photography that I tried not to learn. You had to be careful. Pat talked too technical. It was one of those deals where your eyes would glaze over and you would nod your head. I doubt very seriously if there are ten people in the country that knew as much about working photography as Pat.

MH: At that time, we are talking the early 1970s, what were the big stories that you worked on? Do you recall any big stories that you dealt with?

SK: I guess maybe in the 1970s there was always something big. It seems like every other year we would have a major tornado come through. We did a lot of tornado stuff. We did a lot of political stuff. That was back when Wilbur Mills got into trouble. We shot pictures there. I am trying to think of what else. I guess maybe



a lot of integration stuff was still going on.

MH: Who were the reporters that you enjoyed working with?

SK: Actually, I enjoyed working with a lot of them. They were a lot of fun in the early 1970s. Mike Trimble was a kick.

MH: Wayne Jordan?

SK: Oh yes, I went out with Wayne. Wayne. . .

MH: He was kind of a spark plug in those days, wasn't he?

SK: Yes, he was one of their top writers. Bill Lewis, Bill would crank out five stories a day. You look at the paper, the 1970s *Gazette*, he would write about five or six stories in a day. Later on they separated people into feature writers, news writers, and things like that. Back then everyone just sort of clumped together.

MH: There was still a city desk, and a state desk, and sports?

SK: Yes, there was still that separation of state and city. I can't remember if Jimmy Jones was writing then or not. I remember Jimmy well. The man who I believe held the paper and staff together, who was sort of like the Father Tribou of the *Arkansas Gazette*, was Bill Shelton. Bill was from the old school of journalism. What I remember about Bill Shelton --- I had heard about the cow chip toss at the fairgrounds. I thought it would be fun to shoot pictures of cow manure. I went out there and shot some and put them in Monday's paper. I received a nasty note from Bill Shelton, "Do not EVER shoot another cow chip picture for this paper!" [Laughter] He had his standards, and I went over those standards.

MH: A lot of people were afraid of Shelton.

SK: I don't know if that is the right word or not. They wouldn't argue with him. I don't think Mr. Shelton could have fired them on the spot. I don't know if he ever did. Photography was so separated, it was separated then to an extent that I never really thought of him as being my boss. I just thought of him as being the city editor whom I was scared of.

MH: At this point, had Bob Douglas become managing editor by this time?

SK: Yes, he must have become managing editor soon after. I can't remember at which point that Nelson left and he came in.

MH: Was there a mark of difference between them?

SK: Oh, yes!

MH: What was the difference?

SK: He was a lot more accessible. You could approach him in his office. There was no way in hell that I was going to go in and see A. R. Nelson.

MH: What, at this, point was the state of the competition between the two papers, between the afternoon *Democrat* and the morning *Gazette*? Was there competition?

SK: Not really. The jokes on the radio were basically morning mistakes and the afternoon rewrite. That was how everybody looked at it. We wrote the original stories, and the *Democrat* rewrote them. Of course, that wasn't true. It was true up to a point. It wasn't true as far as the reporters. They had quality reporters there. That was where the *Gazette* got them. They hired them from the *Democrat*. It was sort of like the farm club of the *Gazette*.

MH: Later in the 1970s and earlier in the 1980s, there were some big stories, James Dean Walker. Did you have anything to do with that?

SK: He was already in prison by the time that I had started at the paper. I did a lot of his appeals and things like that. I saw him a couple of times. I actually followed him when he was paroled from the prison system.

MH: Another big one was on the appearance of the scene of Tommy Robinson. I remember that you covered quite a bit.

SK: The stuff that I covered --- you know the things that he was pretty famous for like chaining the prisoners to the state prison gate. I didn't cover that. It happened to be on my day off. I did cover his arrest. I covered the arrest of the county judge, Bill Beaumont, and the count controller. I can't remember her name. She was arrested as well for some financial. . .

MH: She would not release the money that Tommy --- Jo Growcock, I think.

SK: That sounds familiar.

MH: The thing that I wanted to ask you about: a lot of times the reporters are regarded as the people who were in the know. A lot of times the photographer is the one that sees the most of these people. You really see a lot of the events. What did you make of Tommy Robinson at this point?

SK: Tommy Robinson, people either loved him or hated him. The thing is, though, this is just something for Arkansas politicians or, I guess, everywhere. Tommy Robinson was likable. Here is this guy who would like talk really badly about the newspapers. He would make a snide remark but would have a twinkle in his eye.

He would just kind of put me on. He always treated me with a lot of respect. On a personal basis, he was always kind to me.

MH: Another story that came on during the same period that Tommy Robinson had a lot to do with was the McArthur murder.

SK: The day that they arrested Bill McArthur, they sent me to the sheriff's office. I don't know if Tommy tipped us off or what. They were bringing in Bill McArthur for the murder of his wife. Clay Carson, a photographer for the *Arkansas Democrat*, and I were there. Clay was a big man. We were trying to follow and stay ahead of McArthur, as they were bringing him in with handcuffs and stuff. All of a sudden, Clay Carson changed positions or wanted to go a different direction. He raised up, and it threw me up about six feet across the floor into a trash can. [Laughter] Of course, Bill McArthur stopped and looked down and shook his head and said, "Continue on." [Laughter]

MH: So much for the glories of journalism there.

SK: That was an embarrassing moment for sure.

MH: What other big stories do you recall during that period of the early 1980s and mid-1980s? Did you cover any notables coming in from out of town, presidents, kings?

SK: Yes, I have photographed every sitting president since [Richard M.] Nixon. I photographed Nixon when I was at the *Democrat*. I went to the Great Shootout of 1969 in Fayetteville where Texas and Arkansas were playing. Richard Nixon flew in on a helicopter for that game. That was my job, to photograph him.

“Don’t even look at the game, just keep your camera pointed to him.” So that is what I did. I was probably the only person in that entire stadium there during the game who never saw a play.

MH: I believe you got one photograph that was considered “the photograph” of Nixon at that event. He was sitting there with Rockefeller.

SK: I was trying to think of who else. I think [H. R.] Haldeman is in the picture, if I am not mistaken.

MH: It was one of the Watergate cohorts. I can’t remember who it was.

SK: As the 1980s wore on, the *Democrat* switched to morning publication and went head to head with the *Gazette*. There came to be some real competition with the papers.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Side 2, Tape 1]

SK: . . . going to put them out of business. They were on their last leg. Everybody shook their head and left.

MH: Did it seem like a likely prospect that it would happen like that, or did you care?

SK: I cared. Basically, when the *Democrat* went to mornings, we knew there would only be one survivor. At least I did. I couldn’t imagine having two morning papers for very long. It actually wound up being for quite awhile.

MH: In terms of that competition, you had the photo staff of Larry Obsitnik, Gene Prescott . . .

SK: Pat Patterson, myself. After I had been there a year or so, they hired Don Jones.

Don is the brother of Gary Jones. They started Jones Production and did a lot of videotaping and filming. Gary Jones worked for WFAA in Dallas at the time.

Don just got out of Arkansas State and came to work for us. He was here for a couple of years.

MH: Who was your opposite number over there at the *Democrat*? What was the photo staff?

SK: After I left --- I believe they hired Robert Ike Thomas as my replacement. Robert Ike ended up being the photo chief of the *Democrat* because Owen Gunter died from a heart attack. So they put Robert Ike in charge. I am trying to think of the different photographers that were there. There was a long line of photographers, everybody from Michael McMullen, who is at the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* now, Gary Fountain, who is in Utica, New York. Lee Crumb was a free lance photographer out of New Orleans. Larry Coyne who is the co-editor of the St. Louis paper. They had some pretty quality guys coming through there, well known and well respected photo journalists. It was a lot of fun. We would get out there and compete.

MH: Was it a friendly competition at this point?

SK: Oh, yes.

MH: It pretty much maintained a friendly competition throughout the news war with the photographers, didn't it?

SK: Yes, friendly. We wouldn't try to go out to trash another photographer. We all had the same job to do. We would just try to sneak around and get something

they didn't have. That was the fun part. We were just trying to out do the other one. That's how we did it. We would talk about it later on over beers. That's just how we approached it. It stayed like that throughout the entire competition.

MH: Into the mid 1980s, things started to get pretty intense. The *Democrat* eventually went to the free want ads. They did all sorts of things. The competition got pretty intense. Sometimes they would have two reporters covering something that one *Gazette* reporter had. Did you think there was any possibility that the *Gazette* might lose this competition?

SK: No, we would have a meeting every two or three months, and Hugh Patterson would come out and say, "It will only be a few more months, and this will be over with. They are on their last leg. They are like the army that is getting beat. They are just throwing everything in there that they can. Pretty soon their resources will be dried up." My problem with it was after so many years it became the same story over and over again. I had problems trying to figure out in my mind how the *Democrat* was going to lose when they keep growing. It kept growing, and that was the scary part. There were some major things that happened at the *Gazette*. I don't know if you want to talk about rumors or anything like that. I think one of the death blows was when *Arkansas Gazette* lost Dillard's ads. The ad that ran an entire page in the back of the A section, I guess, every day. Plus whatever else they could put inside. It was a major advertiser. They just lost them to the *Democrat*. Of course, we all heard the rumors and stuff that there was such bad blood between Bill Dillard and Hugh Patterson. Whatever it was. I am

not the business manager. I know nothing about advertising. Losing that much advertising is major damage. They obviously did.

MH: You and I worked on a number of different stories together. One of them was a whole series of events that ended up in the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and state police siege of the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord camp back in the 1980s. Can you tell me what you remember about that whole thing? How did that begin? How did you go about shooting that? It started out with an escaped shooter, if I remember correctly.

SK: Wasn't that in Missouri, or something like that? I don't know how I was chosen or what. I was assigned with you. You had been working on the story for quite awhile. For me, it was something new. I didn't really keep up with it that much. If my memory is correct, an escapee shot a Missouri state trooper and killed him. They had a manhunt going on in southern Missouri for him. We drove up there that afternoon and shot pictures late afternoon of them searching cars. They had a roadblock going. They had people stop, and they would raise the trunk with shot guns pointed at the trunk. It was a pretty big deal. They never did find the prisoner. There was rumor that he made it all the way to the CSA camp. I guess it was private property of a right-wing group in Mountain Home, Arkansas. It was maybe ten miles outside of Mountain Home. We were diverted there. I was transmitting black and white photos to the paper. I processed the film from our motel room and found a phone line that I could use. I would transfer one or two pictures back at night. It began with the Missouri State Police looking for the



fugitive, and [we] ended up in Mountain Home staying in a motel there.

Obviously, there were other media that were aware of it. That first day when we were out there, there were maybe one or two others. Maybe a Mountain Home radio station and a Mountain Home newspaper reporter. I can't recall if it was that first day or second day --- all we did was go out to the dirt road and sit there outside these people's property. We were just keeping an eye on them. I don't know if it was the first or second day after we were in Missouri, somebody got the bright idea of driving down there and interviewing them. So everybody got into their cars and drove down there. I think you were left behind for some reason.

MH: It was actually a competitive reason. The guy who had this car wasn't interested in having the *Gazette* reporter along.

SK: Apparently, we drove down into the compound, and we almost triggered a gun fight. They thought we were the Feds moving in on them. Their spokesperson, Kerry Noble, came out. There were a few quotes and things like that and they told us, "Hey, you guys almost got killed." About that time, I turned around and here you came hoofing it up the dirt road. Which I am surprised you survived that.

MH: We got the story though.

SK: What was funny, though, you would see people from the camp. I am sure you will remember this. There was a tower that had at least one person up there with binoculars and a high powered rifle. When we were down there talking with Kerry Noble, I looked back behind us and there were two guys walking up the

road with wires like you would hook dynamite up to. [Laughter] I figured these guys were serious! [Laughter]

MH: They were all dressed in camouflage with the belts.

SK: We were out here in our little short-sleeved shirts and khakis.

MH: Eventually, after a few days, as I recall, we were sitting on a fence waiting for something to happen. Something did happen.

SK: The night before --- I don't know if you remember this --- our paper was going to bring us back. They were wanting us to come on back because, obviously, nothing was happening. You just can't stay out there forever. There was a state trooper, and I recognized him as he came in.

MH: This was in a restaurant in Mountain Home, as I recall.

SK: I turned around and said, "Is it wise for us to leave? Our paper wants us to leave or should we be hanging around for another day?" He was quiet for awhile and then said, "I would hang around for awhile longer." [Laughter] Sure enough, the next day, the state police, and I'm not sure who else, moved in. It looked like a military operation instead of a police operation. They were all in camouflage and their faces were painted in camouflage. This was another learning tool. Shoot your pictures fast. If you don't, you will not get an opportunity. As soon as they moved in, we were shooting our pictures, and they said, "We are going to need you to move back 100 yards. We are really busy right here. Just 100 yards and you can see what is going on." So we moved back 100 yards. About 10 or 15 minutes they asked us to move back another 100 yards. That's all. They moved

us again. I thought, "Dang, I can't even see anything." Before I knew it, they had moved us all the way back to the road to the highway.

MH: You were shooting the whole time and had photographs.

SK: Sure. That is the thing. You just start firing away. Any minute they could kick your butt out of there, which they did. They did it in such a way that we did not realize that we got kicked out until after the fact.

MH: For days after that we did not have any photographs except for the ones that we got in those first minutes.

SK: Exactly. I don't know if you remember this, but I left that weekend. My son was in an automobile accident. There was a point in time that I was going to have to leave because he was in the hospital. As it turned out, he wasn't injured.

MH: As I remember, your son was in an auto accident while we were in Missouri. You had stayed on the job although it wasn't easy for you to do. You were worried about your son.

SK: Sure. I had no idea if he was in the hospital or not. He flipped his mom's Oldsmobile. He had all his buddies in it and no one was hurt. It was a thing, you were young then, and I think you understand now. You shouldn't let your home stuff override your work stuff.

MH: That is one of the reasons that I asked you to talk about all this stuff is because it is a dilemma that photographers find themselves in all the time. You work a lot of hours. You work in all sorts of situations. Sometimes school plays and various other things suffer because of it. I remember seeing you going through a lot of

changes because you had to balance those two out. Can you tell me a little bit about that over the course of your career?

SK: You basically feel like you have cheated your children out of things. You do! I believe I could have been a much better father if I had worked at Wal-Mart or something, but who knows, though? I think any job you have is demanding and if you want to do a good job --- in newspaper work you can do your job half-assed if you wanted to. I think you can get by with it if you are good enough. You can pretend or whatever. If you really work hard to do it, it takes a lot away from your home life. You just have to come up with a balance there. It is a situation — I never know if the things I have done in the past are correct or not. I just try to live my life.

MH: The end of that CSA story is that the FBI and the authorities arrested most of these people, and there was a series of trials and what not.

SK: It was sort of like a pre-Waco [reference to the incident in Waco, Texas, involving the Branch Dividian cult] stuff. Of course, we didn't know what Waco was back then. There was nothing we could actually look at and compare that to. But since then there has been a lot of similar things that have ended up being tragedies. I just never thought of that as turning out to be a tragedy. It could very easily have been a massacre.

MH: In fact, some of the same folks who were involved in Waco were also at the CSA camp. Now let me bring you into the Gannett period. As I recall, when Gannett first came on board, there was a major change in the photo department in terms of

equipment and your commission, in terms of loss of different things. Can you talk about that some?

SK: The one big change was that we went from black and white to color photography, almost immediately. It brought in new presses and so we continually used more and more color. I remember criticism about Gannett buying the *Gazette* from the Pattersons. They did start pumping money into the paper, and we could actually go out and cover an assignment. I remember when Gordon Kahl was boarded up in a house in northern Arkansas, surrounded by FBI and whoever else. He was a fugitive from the west and had killed a couple of federal agents. He was an income tax evader, and that was why they were going after him to arrest him. He went all the way to Arkansas and hid out in the boondocks. Everybody and their brother was there except for the *Gazette*. They didn't want to pay the mileage for someone to go there and cover it. John Carey, who was a photographer, a good photographer, with the *Chicago Sun* now, begged Carrick Patterson to send him. He said, "We can't. We don't have any money to pay the mileage." Here we are a newspaper, and we didn't have the money to cover assignments. When Gannett came, a lot of people were bitching about the changes, but the way I look at it was. "Just give us some money to work with. They are going to send us even if something happens outside the border of Arkansas," which it did. Like the Delta plane crash in Dallas/Fort Worth. They sent me and two reporters and maybe a graphics person to Dallas in a private plane. We went there and covered it. We found Arkansans in the hospital and sneaked in and got their pictures. We flew

back and put it in the paper. We put out a hell of a paper.

MH: There was a big difference between the way the old *Gazette* looked at photographs and the way Gannett looked at photographs.

SK: Yes.

MH: In fact, one of Gannett's biggest priorities was the presentation of the paper.

SK: Yes. What they did was they came in. Reporters who were running 30- and 40-inch depth stories were all of the sudden having to write 15- and 20- inch stories on the same subject. They were using photographs at least one column bigger. A horizontal picture in the *Gazette* would always be a three-column. A vertical picture would be a two-column. Well, you just took up one column when Gannett came. Every horizontal picture on the front page ran four columns above the fold. Below, they might run a three-column. The verticals would run three columns. It was wonderful for us. A lot of people said it was the end for the Old Gray Lady. I guess it was. It wasn't gray anymore.

MH: Was it a challenge at all for you or the other photographers to now have to think in terms of color? Did it make any difference to you?

SK: Not really. I never did. I don't know if anybody else did. We had to be more careful with lighting because of the presses. They were on us --- before when they ran the picture small, they weren't that interested in making sure everything was sharp or making sure everything was lit well or whatever. We did the best we could. They put more pressure on us to have a higher quality pictures. I think everybody was shooting a quality picture.

MH: You began to carry more equipment than you previously did?

SK: Oh, yes. You set up lights and things like that because our first film processor was a slide. The higher the number, the faster the film. A 400 film that we were used to with tri-x black and white, we could shoot easily in a dark room, or in a room without any added light. When we went to slide film, which was a 100 ASA, we could shoot it easily outside in broad daylight. If we came inside, we were going to have trouble getting the proper exposure. We wound up dragging along little lights and things like that. It took up a little bit more front end time. The spontaneity was gone in a sense that it was hard to set lights and take a picture at the same time.

MH: People who are in a hurry also . . .

SK: Sure. You just had to --- I mean it was a lot of stress in that sense. I think it was the best thing in the world for me. It gave me a little bit of discipline. You get lazy and get used to doing things a certain way and you do it in your sleep. You can shoot things in your sleep, which is the worst thing in the world to do. I became a better photographer because of Gannett and the added pressure they put on me. They wanted a higher quality.

MH: It made your job more interesting, I think.

SK: You better believe it. It was a lot more fun and actually we became more of a star. That is a bad way of saying it, but our photographs became a lot more noticeable. I had more people saying, "What a great picture." They would just start talking about photographs which they had never talked about at the old

*Gazette*. You might get a good picture here and there but everyday we had a great photograph.

MH: It is safe to say that during the time of the old *Gazette*, the photography department was considered sort of a slave to words.

SK: I like to refer to it as a step-child. We were there as a service. We were there for a reporter. If they were doing a story we had to go out and document that picture for that story. When Gannett came in, we became more of a team. A reporter would say, "Hey, I have a great picture of a guy over here. Did we get a quote from him?" That was how reporters would do it. They would put in a good story, with a good quote from a good picture. We just kind of worked together like that.

MH: I don't know how much of this you were aware of --- there was a kind of culture change coming on. The reporters often resented the prominence the photographs were getting. Specifically, that instance there, some reporters really resented that. They felt it was backwards. Were you aware of that complex?

SK: Oh, sure. We would have a complex. Max Brantley and I are friends and have been for years, ever since he came to the paper. We had so many fights over the years. Photographs should be used to document a story. I felt photographs should be part of intelligent stories. I think the problem that we had as that all of us, including myself, got most of our training working at the *Arkansas Gazette*. The *Arkansas Gazette* did things a certain way. The problem is that the *Arkansas Gazette* did not change as quickly as they should have as to how society was. Maybe ten percent of the people in the state of Arkansas would read the *Gazette*



for the full content. Ninety percent of the people were not getting any benefits out of this at all. What Gannett tried doing, when they came in, was to widen that base by bringing in young people and people who would never read the paper. [Gannett] would just try to bring them into the reading. What was lost was the in depth stories. I remember Carol Griffie writing 60-inch public service stories.

MH: For the public service commission?

SK: Our paper would run them. I think you would be hard pressed to find ten people in the entire state who read all of them. It was wonderfully documented. The idea of the newspaper is to inform as large a mass of people as you can. That was what Gannett did with the gray old lady. They weren't about to keep it a gray old lady because there was a dwindling subscription rate. I am sure that subscriptions were on the verge of decreasing. There was lack of readership. The *Democrat* on the other hand was throwing sensational stories at them on the other side. You had John Robert Starr over there, and people would read him just to see how outlandish he got.

MH: Moving into the later Gannett period --- Pat Patterson stepped in as photo editor, I believe.

SK: Yes, he became photo editor when Larry Obsitnik died. Larry passed away back in the early 1980s. Pat became photo editor. About the time Gannett came in, Pat stepped down as photo editor. Jeff Mitchell stepped in, who was one of the photographers that came in after I did. Jeff was probably one of the greatest bosses I ever had.

MH: Now that you mentioned it --- let me digress just a little bit and ask you about when Larry Obsitnik was chief and when he died. I understand that the photographers of both papers had a little send off for him.

SK: Yes. I kind of organized it. I did not realize how big it was going to be. I thought a couple of us could go out there --- like I said earlier, Larry enjoyed whiskey. We took a pint of whiskey to the cemetery about 11:00 at night. A bunch of us had to jump over the fence. We all went around there and did a toast and left. About that time, after we had left, the cops were alerted that prowlers were in the cemetery. Nobody was arrested or even caught. It was kind of fun and thought it would be a great tribute to one of us that had gone on.

MH: How many people would you say were in on this all together?

SK: We have a photograph. I am guessing, probably, about twenty to thirty people were out there. Most were photographers and reporters.

MH: Can you name who might have been there?

SK: I would say about every staff person who was on at the *Democrat* and at the *Gazette*. Barry Arthur, who is my boss now, Alex Brandon, who was a *Democrat* photographer who is now in New Orleans, John Simmons.

MH: Pretty much any photographer that was still in town?

SK: Who was still in the town. I know that I am leaving out a lot of names, but I just can't [remember them all].

MH: Now that we are finished with that digression, let me get back to what we were talking about. Jeff Mitchell became photo editor. When did you get the feeling

that the news world was coming to a close?

SK: There was not a certain moment. Like I said, about every two months we would have a staff meeting. It would be basically the same rhetoric. They would say, "Well, it won't be long now." After about five, six, seven years ---- you know, Gannett came in. I didn't know what tax laws were. Gannett had owned us for five years. I just started getting a funny feeling. I thought, "You know, they are going to dump us." I think they tried selling us, but could not find a buyer. They just decided to close the paper. I believe that was the chain of events. There were little things, editors being sent elsewhere. Jeff Mitchell was the last person in the building to believe the paper was going to close, fold. I started doing my portfolio. I had never done a portfolio before. I just started printing up pictures for a portfolio probably two or three months before we closed. He would say, "Steve, we are not going to close. I am telling you. I have sat in on these meetings and we are not going to close." Of course I would shake my head and go back to printing my portfolio. About a week before, he came back and said, "You are right."

MH: That must have hit you and some of the other long time employees pretty hard.

SK: Oh, yes. Very hard. I was forty something, around forty-five or so.

MH: It was ten years ago.

SK: Well, then, I was forty-five. I had this job for twenty years. I was two or three months shy of twenty years. I started in 1972. It closed in October of 1991. I was a few months shy of twenty years. It is pretty scary when you are a forty-

five-year-old guy looking for a job. Photography was the only thing I knew how to do.

MH: Were you mad or angry?

SK: No. I was more scared than anything. I couldn't figure out what I was going to do for the rest of my life. Luckily, I got to the point I started pestering Gannett. That is one thing that I have learned in life. If you really want something, just pester the hell out of somebody. You just have to keep bugging them. That was what I would do with Gannett. I would call the corporate office everyday. I would say, "Hey, you have any openings anywhere?"

MH: This was after the paper had closed?

SK: This was probably three months after the paper closed. Finally, they said, "Steve, there is a place looking for an experienced photographer. It is in Elmira, New York." I said, "I will take it." They flew me out to Elmira. They just seemed so happy to have someone that shot pictures before for a living. I got the job right off the bat. In fact, I did a try-out. I got two or three good pictures, a front picture.

MH: On a try-out!

SK: When I came in there, I was a star. That was kind of funny because I wasn't used to that. I was just use to being one of the gang. All of a sudden I go this small paper. It was kind of fun being somebody that people actually respected.

MH: People respected you at the *Gazette*?

SK: Well, not . . .

MH: You stayed at Elmira for . . .

SK: For just a little over a year.

MH: From what year to what year?

SK: Spring of 1992 to spring of 1993. That was when Barry Arthur from the *Democrat-Gazette* became photo editor. Carlton said, "Hey, we have an opening." This was kind of surprising because when the *Gazette* closed, both papers had such a big staff. We were just over staffed because of the competition. I didn't figure they could get it down to where they could hire anybody sometime soon. I didn't even think about working for them. He called me out of the blue. I know how he thought I was covering an assignment and got out of position. I wound up in the background of the photograph that they used in the *Arkansas Democrat*. He thought, "There's Steve." So he calls me out of the blue and offers the job to me. I didn't even come in for an interview. He just asked me if I wanted it. I said, "Sure." They hired me right over the phone. So I gave Elmira a couple of weeks notice and said, "I appreciate it." In the meantime, my oldest son had his first child. I was a grandfather. I had never seen my grandson. It was good to make it back to Arkansas. The experience was wonderful for me, personally. As far as photo wise, it let me know I could be a good photographer anywhere I went. I just never had that kind of confidence.

thought of me.

MH: You have been working for the *Democrat Gazette* since then?

SK: Yes. I have been there going on eight years. They have treated me --- to be

honest with you, I can't tell a difference between working at the *Democrat-Gazette* and working at the old *Gazette*. Now they still have some problems. I promise you that every newspaper has problems. Photography takes good care of us. The pay is adequate. If you get into newspaper work you can expect some bad things.

MH: Can you tell me about the award you won not too long ago?

SK: Yes. The University of Arkansas at Little Rock sends out an annual journalism award to the journalist of the year. With the help of Barry Arthur and John Paul Jones, who works part-time at the University, who was our lab tech and a long time friend. I have known John Paul since I was at the *Jacksonville Daily News*. He was a high school kid. I think both of them put my name in on the deal. It was a really big surprise. They made me do a twenty- or thirty-minute speech. That was really draining on this end but it was fun.

MH: The name of the award was "Journalist of the Year," right?

SK: Yes.

MH: How did that make you feel to have it called "Journalist of the Year?" Not photographer, not photo journalist, but journalist?

SK: I liked it. I thought it was cool. It has always been my impression --- I call myself a photojournalist. I didn't back in the early days. Photojournalist --- the way that I tell a story is through photographs. That sort of says that photographers can tell stories and cover the news and express the news as someone can with words. I felt good about it. I am the first and I am sure that I

am not going to be the last. Photojournalism is a way of --- I think that people are going to look on my good days and look at my photograph and tell, basically, what is going on without having to say a word, just from the photographs. This is my goal.

MH: Over the years that I have known you, you have always been on the go. If I am driving down the highway, I can see Steve Keesee on the side of the road with his camera shooting a picture of a fireman putting out a grass fire. At the legislature, Steve Keesee is out on the ground taking pictures of President [Bill] Clinton. If I am out at night sometimes, I can see you covering stuff. A lot of the stuff that you cover is sometimes deep at its worst, a police stand off, or a number of other situations. You have seen hundreds or maybe even thousands of these situations. What is your general feeling about people? Having seen them at their worst and in some cases seeing them at their best. What have you learned from all of these experiences just as a human being?

SK: I have a hard time justifying what I do, sometimes. Like you say, I wind up getting people at the low moment of their life. If it is a traffic accident or a fatality involved or whatever, fire ---- then you wind up photographing the living dealing with the tragedy which is what a good photojournalist does. You learn one thing, people are basically, very, --- I don't know how to put it into words.

MH: Are you looking for, maybe, fragile?

SK: I don't know. People are so understanding. Something bad happens to somebody, you have some idiot over there with a big camera --- most people

understand it. It just blows me away. I hope that I would have as much grace as some of the people that I run into. Say, if something bad happens in my family and I am involved, I hope that I have some dignity. I think they understand that I am just trying to show a moment. Not to embarrass them personally, or trying to show them at their low point. I am just trying to show that this could happen to any of us.

MH: Do you ever feel like an intruder in this?

SK: Well, of course. A lot of times I am an intruder. I just try to stay back, stay out of their way as much as possible, and try to stay out of trouble. The last thing that you want is somebody yelling at you, "I have just lost a loved one." I don't want them to take it out on me. That would just ruin me. You try to be honest with people. I try to approach them a lot of times to get their name after I have taken their picture. I explain to them what I did and what kind of picture I got and that I am sorry for bothering them. I ask them for their name and nine times out of ten they will give me their name. They understand.

MH: Is there a particular photograph that you wish you had taken and didn't and now regret it?

SK: Yes. There are a bunch of them. It seems like everyday. There are a lot of things — like being stuck in that newspaper office in Marianna. I wish that I had taken the film and hidden it in my underwear. [Laughter] Just to have proof that this actually happened. There are more pictures that I have missed than I have gotten.

MH: To sort of sum up. What did the *Gazette* mean to your life?



SK: It was not only the *Gazette*, it was Arkansas. I grew up in Indiana. When I was in Indianapolis, I applied for a newspaper job, the Lafayette paper. They gave me a half a day try-out. I kicked butt. I was really pretty good. They said, "We can't really use you. You don't have an education. You don't have a college degree." I felt that there was no way that I could become a newspaper photographer without having some kind of a degree. I moved to Arkansas and they judged me on my talent instead of what kind of paper I was carrying around. The *Arkansas Gazette* never questioned me. I don't ever remember anybody asking me if I had a college degree. I filled out an application or something like that, nobody even thought of that.

[End of Interview]